

TRENDS OF TV NEWS COVERAGE IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract: *The media booming especially the rise of satellite television channels is a significant phenomenon in the landscape of Bangladesh media which was initiated after the fall of autocratic regime in 1990. At present, twenty four satellite TV channels are in operation under the corporate ownership. These satellite channels are presenting hour-round news and views on different events and affairs. The state-owned BTV was the sole medium to cover and disseminate news, information and entertainment to the country-wide audience till 1999. Within a period of one and a half decade, ‘the media boom’ that Bangladesh is experiencing is not noticed in many other countries of the South-Asian region. In spite of this significant change in terms of quantity and ownership pattern, there still lacks a comprehensive broadcast policy to guide day-to-day operations of the channels. The article, in this backdrop, presents trend of the ever-growing satellite channels in covering news. The article also explores interests of the TV channels in terms of news selection, treatment and presentation.*

Keywords: *News coverage, state-owned television, news selection*

Introduction:

The Television (TV) is a powerful electronic medium which can reach the audience with news, views, education, entertainment and developmental motivation programs. Due to audio-visual nature of this medium, it can draw attention of the millions of people, even those having little or no educational background.

The TV has changed the previous media in terms of presenting news and entertainment. “Television was invented as a result of scientific and technical research. Its power as a medium of news and entertainment was then so great that it altered all preceding media of news and entertainment” (Williams: 2004).

The most powerful tool of TV is using the ‘visualization’ of a fact or event. It can be said that visualization of a fact is more powerful than the thousands of

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words. What cannot be described with thousands of words might be led to understand the audience with a single video footage of TV news. TV is 'superior to the print media' due to its magic power of telling and presenting a fact or event meaningfully and successfully (Acharya: 1987).

A great many things have lost their appeal after the arrival of TV. Not only the movies, but the national magazines as well, have been hit very hard by this new medium. Even the comic books have declined greatly (McLuhan: 1994).

Of the multi-dimensional contents of TV, news is one of the most powerful and attractive one. The TV has power and ability to bring the audience to the spot of an event as if the audience might think they were experiencing the same even from the spot of an incident. The TV news presents some key aspects of an event so that the audience can understand the significance and dimensions of the fact. Due to audio-visual effect of TV news, the facts are lively presented to the audience and they get involved with the news. Thus, TV news satisfies the inquisitiveness of the audience mind through presenting video footage and audio description.

The TV news is a dangerously powerful and influential political institution serving the interests of the powerful class of a society (Hallin:1986).

In the perspective of Bangladesh, TV is a very powerful tool of communication having ability and access to reach about half of that population who is deprived of light of education. As the TV messages are delivered with dialogue, music, words, sentences and video footages, they can easily be communicative and understandable to the people who cannot read or write. As a mass medium, The TV has some other benefits, which include: different sizes and portability, affordability, operation on batteries and solar energy, and low setup costs. The TV can be used as an instrument to inform large masses of widely dispersed rural and semi-literate or illiterate people about new ideas, services, or products that can improve their lives.

Emergence of Satellite TV Channels in Bangladesh

According to the media practitioners, the country is now experiencing 'media boom' dominantly by the prevalence of electronic media, i.e. the satellite television channels. But, even before 1990s, Bangladesh media was strongly dominated by the print media. Whatever was meant by the electronic media in the country was only two state-run broadcast media, the Bangladesh Television (BTV) and Bangladesh Betar. These two broadcast media met the demands of the people with huge geographic coverage ability.

The privatization policy of the government has not only helped flourishing of the print media but also created a congenial environment for expanding the private television channels and FM Radios. In the early 1990s, Cable TV was introduced and it became popular quickly. In 1991 and 1996 elections, both the major political parties-the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) called for a free, fair and democratic broadcasting system under an autonomous authority. As part of their privatization policy, the first measure toward privatization of Television was, however, taken in March 1999, authorizing privately owned Ekushey TV to go on air by the end of 1999.

An estimate of the Ministry of Information shows that there were 23 private television channels till November 2010 which are regarded as the medium of entertainment and a good source of news. The TV entertainment was initiated by the ATN Bangla which was the first entertainment channel in the country launched in 1997. With the trend of expansion, BTV, the sole state-run, TV in the country, has also launched a satellite channel titled BTV World in 2005. The sole Islamic Satellite Channel-Islamic TV started functioning during the regime of caretaker government in 2007. Channel i ran 24 hours a day and launched the first digital Bangla channel in 1999. Thus, the growing satellite channels are functioning as the sources of news, views, information, educational and entertainment programmes (Wahid: 2007).

Reality of TV Ownership and Control

All the television channels excluding BTV and BTV World are privately owned having corporate control and management. One of the significant aspects of ownership of the TV channels is affiliation with ideology of three major political parties, i.e. Bangladesh Awami League (AL), Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jammata-e-Islami Bangladesh (Rahman: 2009). Among the first generation satellite channels, ATN Bangla and ETV had affiliation with AL while the top management of Channel i was perceived leaning towards political ideology of both AL and BNP. The management of second generation channels, for instance, the authority of NTV, RTV, Channel One (presently defunct), Boishakhi TV and Banglavisian are perceived having affiliation with the BNP since the channels got license during the regime of party. Among the third generation satellite channels, the management of Desh TV, Somoy TV, Mohona TV, Independent TV, Ekattor TV, Bijoy TV, Channel 24, Channel 9 and Asian TV are perceived having affiliation with the present ruling party AL since they got license during the present government. On the other hand, the management of Diganta TV is perceived having political connection with Jammata-e-Islami Bangladesh.

Political attachment of the management of SATV, Massranga TV and mytv is not clear (Maddhyam: 2010).

Either the management of the aforesaid channels or the senior practitioners (journalists in key positions) involved in the policy making of the channels have their own political and corporate identity. It is thought that availing license without political affiliation especially with the political party in power is hardly possible. There is also instance of changing political attachment and ownership after getting license from a particular government. Whatever is obvious in the media world now-a-days is business. For example, management of one of the TV channels which got license from the present government showing political attachment with the same sold the share to another corporate house belonging to opposite political affiliation. The news items of most of the channels are sponsored by various corporate organizations like Bank, Insurance Company and other influential business conglomerates. Hence, the political economy of private satellite television channels comes to the front since the business demands a huge investment for their smooth operation and profits. It is widely thought that the ownership pattern has direct influence and control over the news and content of the TV channels.

Objectives of the Study

The study has been conducted in order to understand the following:

- types of news that usually receive more media attention and coverage
- issues and subjects that are generally covered with due importance
- faces and figures which are generally projected more importantly
- understand focus on people's voice
- comprehend and identify the nature of the sponsors of the news

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The theoretical framework of the present study bases on some established perspectives of media and communication which ideally include: Normative Media Theory, Agenda Setting Function of the Media, Power Theory by Michel Foucault, Marxist Perspective of Media Theory, Propaganda Model and Media Hegemony Theory.

According to the normative theory of the mass media, the role of the media has been defined as the 'social responsibility' through their 'watchdog' functions. According to V. Held (1970), the role of media are usually determined through the vote of 'Majoritarian' reflecting expectation of the majority people in the society while in the 'Unitarian' notion, the role of the same is defined based on a particular class of the people having power and influence.

Public interest is really difficult to understand though the matters of public welfare should be the priority of media content. However, McQuail (2000) emphasized four objectives of the role of media in a democratic society:

- surveillance in the cases of violation of social and moral discipline in the society and access to information without interference
- timely criticism of the functions of society and its organs
- encouraging people's participation through access to information
- transmission of values and culture of particular groups to generations

According to the Kurt Lang & Gladys Engel Lang, the agenda setting of media denotes putting importance on those issues and affairs which they think important and beneficial to people while they similarly ignore those issues which they think less important. Thus, the media formulate the framework of people's thinking (Lowery & Defleur: 1988).

Power exists in all the core elements of a society. But power is not a matter of implementation, rather it can be established through interaction. Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategically situation in a particular society (Foucault:1980).

The economy is the base of society by which everything is controlled. In the media system, it is also true that the influential and powerful class control the media where the class is ultimately reflected (Marx:1859).

In light of the Marxism, the media can be defined as follows:

- media are owned by the powerful class
- media serve the interest of the powerful class
- media disseminate the ideology of the powerful class
- media ignore the opposite political ideology
- media portray a false consciousness among the mass people
- media in the real sense serve the class people rather than the mass people

The main theme of the propaganda model is to influence the targeted group of people or audience on the opinion and agenda of a particular group of people. In the book, 'Manufacturing Consent: the Political Economy of the Mass Media', Edward S. Herman & Noam Chomsky viewed that media propagates for protecting the interests of the influential class in the society.

The hegemony paradigm of Gramsci plays a central role in understanding the functions of mass media, and hegemony is becoming powerful day by day. Hegemony brings conflict between mind and central opinion among the

audience. The value of mass media and the attributed power of people are related with the concept. This is because Gramsci viewed to observe the role of media with hegemony of the elite class having intelligence, power and influence (Gramsci: 1971) (Hossain & Rahman: 2004).

A content analysis conducted by Kazi Mamun Haider in 2005 on ATN Bangla, NTV and Channel i showed that the political news got the highest priority in the TV channels. The study also revealed that the TV channels had political leaning towards presenting the political news. One of the significant aspects of the TV news coverage was that they prioritized the protocol values rather than news values by giving importance on the certain Members of the Parliament and Ministers (Haider: 2007).

In an article published in 2004, Rahman mentioned that the TV channels showed inconsequentiality in selecting news items and stereotypical tendency of covering and presenting news rather than the real values of the same (Rahman : 2004).

In every stage of national development, the role of TV is indispensable. In the Western Countries, and even in the neighboring country India, satellite channels are playing pioneer role in promoting socio-economic, political and cultural development. But this practice is still a far cry in Bangladesh. Gap in matured understanding by the political leaders, poor socio-economic development and the absence of a long-term visionary plan about electronic media are the major obstacles to the path of serving the interest of the mass people (Rahman:2004).

Research Questions

Based on the aforesaid discussions from different paradigms related to the role of media, the following inquiries were made in the study:

- Do the TV channels in Bangladesh consider face and protocol value rather than the news value in selecting and presenting news?
- Do the urban issues and events get much more coverage than rural ones?
- Do the unimportant events and issues turn into news due to TV coverage?
- Are the mass people being deprived of exposure in the TV news in spite of being owner of the airwave?
- Are the news items politically biased?

Methodology

The study has been conducted applying ‘content analysis’ method. The content analysis is a scholarly approach of studying the content of communication materials and content. The essence of the content analysis lies in the statement of Lasswell and Krippendorff. Lasswell, through his famous definition of communication, framed the base of the content analysis by saying: “Who says what, to whom, why, to what extent and with what effect?”

Dr. Klaus Krippendorff has suggested to consider the following questions in a content analysis:

- Which data are analyzed?
- How are they defined?
- What is the population from which they are drawn?
- What is the context relative to which the data are analyzed?
- What are the boundaries of the analysis?
- What is the target of the inferences?

Taking into consideration of the aforesaid aspects of content analysis, the following components have been reflected in the study:

- genre of content and origin of news classification of news (event based, issue based, person/institution based)
- nature of news (straight jacket, investigative, interpretative, follow-up, desk report etc.)
- news treatment, geographical settings and coverage
- accuracy, objectivity and fairness of the content exploration, preparation and presentation
- words, sentences and discourse and quotation and expression used in the content
- quality of information from the sources and quality of investigation and compilation of the gathered information
- variation of topic(s) covered in the content and diversification of topic(s) used in the content
- overt and covert meaning of the news communicated through the content and
- effectiveness and communicative competence of the content

Sampling for Content Analysis

The population for the study is all the satellite TV channels in Bangladesh. Out of these, news of three TV Channels i.e. ATN Bangla, Ekattor TV and NTV were analyzed. A total of 270 news items presented in twelve prime time news of the sample TV channels during 16-19 January 2013 came under the study. All these channels were selected based on convenient sampling procedure. While selecting channels, following aspects were taken into consideration:

- i. ATN Bangla was selected since it was one of the first generation satellite channels of the country
- ii. NTV was selected since it is one of the popular channels of second generation satellite channels
- iii. Ekattor TV was selected amongst the new generation TV channels

Moreover, these TV channels have affiliation with different political parties i.e. the ATN Bangla is perceived having affiliated with the present ruling party Bangladesh Awami League while the Chairman of NTV is directly

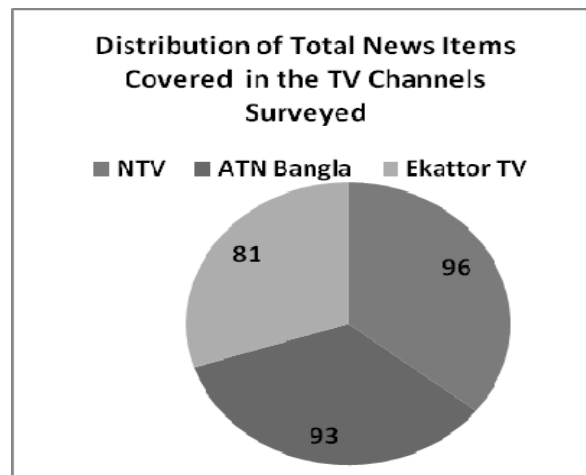


Figure 1: Distribution of Total News Items Covered in the TV Channels Surveyed

involved with policy making of Bangladesh Nationalist Party being a senior leader and advisor to the Chair of BNP. On the other hand, the Managing Director of Ekattor TV is perceived a pro-Awami Journalist. It is also mentionable that the channel is one of the leading news-based TV channels in the country.

One of the key leaders (presently in jail on the charge of war crimes) of Jammata-e-Islami Bangladesh owns a satellite channel named 'Diganta Television'. It is the sole channel under the ownership having direct political connection with Jammata-e-Islami Bangladesh. However, it is perceived to have considerable impact on the audience yet in terms of popularity and exposure. This is why the channel was not considered for sampling in the study. Bangladesh Television (BTV) has not also been considered for the study since there is an inherited allegation against it to serve the interests of ruling party.

Findings from the Content Analysis

Although the size of the data gathered is not enough to draw any concrete conclusion about the tendency of the TV channels in covering and presenting news, the findings will provide an understanding of the interests of the TV management/owners and the journalists in covering the news on different issues and affairs.

The study reveals that the NTV has presented the highest number of news items while the ATN Bangla held the second position and the Ekattor, the last in terms of covering the same. In terms of coverage and presentation of different types of news items, the channels showed their varied interests. In covering political news, the NTV went ahead of the other channels. It means that the NTV emphasized politics and political events more than other channels. In covering and presenting Prime Minister, Ministers and the powerful bureaucrats, the Ekattor TV has concentrated more while the ATN Bangla held the second position in this case.

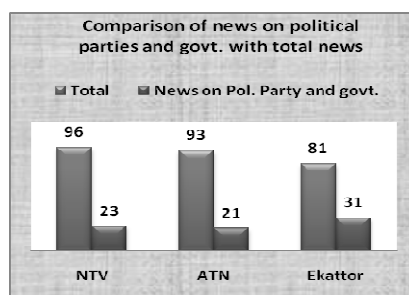


Figure 2: Comparison of news on political parties and govt. with total news

The study revealed that all the news presented were event and issue-based highlighting party, politics, crimes, persons, institutions and corporate houses. The reports covered were mainly the straight jacket in nature though some of them were follow-ups, for example, the news on visit of Prime

Minister in Soviet Russia was presented in the channels as follow-ups. However, there was no investigative and interpretative report covered by the channels. In the perspectives of treatment, the political news were covered with more importance than others.

There was a common trend among all the three channels to cover corporate affairs and events, sports news, and international news more than the issues related to the socio-economic development, education, human rights and development news.

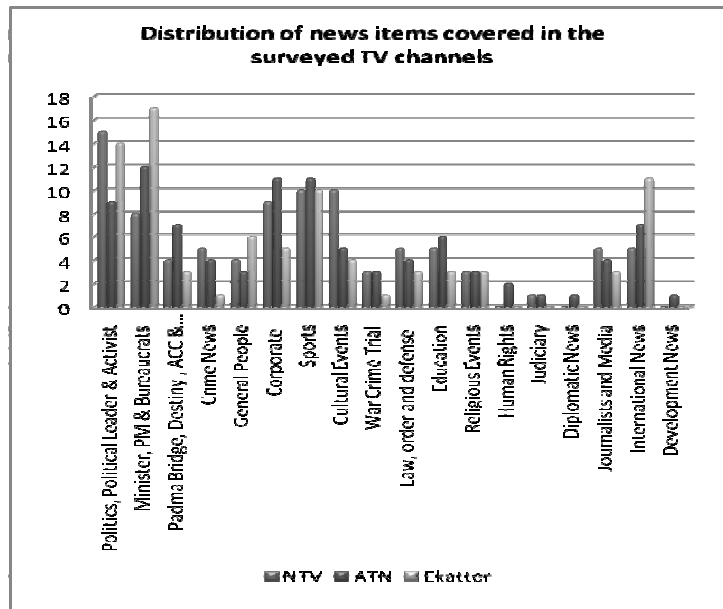


Figure 3: Distribution of news items covered in the surveyed TV channels

Since NTV has political affiliation with BNP, it concentrated on covering news related to crimes, law and order situation and other aspects of the government. The news items on the journalism and media itself got priority in the NTV but it was mostly limited to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) of the channel i.e. news of distribution of blankets among the poor in different regions of the country.

The study revealed that the channels have put emphasis on covering news related to political parties and the government (Prime Minister, ministers and

bureaucrats) much more than others. Of the total news, 24 per cent was presented on such affairs by NTV, 22.5 per cent was presented by ATN Bnagla and the highest 38 per cent was presented by Ekattor TV. It also revealed that the channels did not cover the ordinary people with significance. The issues related to the direct interests of the ordinary people got only 4 per cent coverage in NTV while the coverage was 3 per cent in ATN Bangla and 7 per cent in Ekattor TV.

News on corporate affairs and sports were covered by the channels with due importance. Of the total news, 9 per cent was covered on corporate affairs while 10.4 per cent was sports news on NTV. Of the total news covered by the ATN Bangla, 12 per cent was covered on corporate affairs while the percentage is same for the sports news too. Ekattor TV has put less importance on the corporate affairs in comparison with others presenting 6 per cent of the same while the coverage of sports news was 2 per cent.

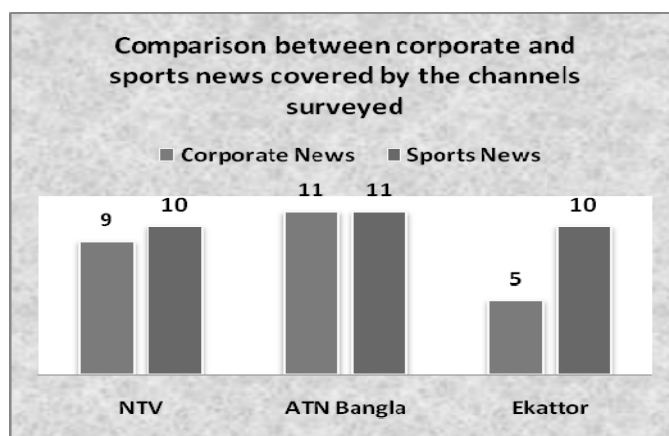


Figure 4: Comparison between corporate and sports news covered by the channels surveyed

Analysis of Findings

Reflection of People's Voice

It is indeed a fact that all the satellite television channels use airwave for transmitting their programmes. The airwave is the property of the mass people since they are the owners of the country. But, it is a reality that the focus of the TV channels is not the mass people, rather the elite class having

money, power, influence and affiliation with major political parties. The relentless struggle of the mass people has been undermined tactfully in the TV news covered in the study. The populace although having got some coverage rarely, were shown and presented as the symbols of passive, poor and powerless which symbolized their liability to the society. Even so, their contributions to socio-economic, political and cultural development were ignored in the news tactfully. The TV news creates a sense of reality regarding the urban-based development and civilization through bypassing sweating struggle of the poor peasants. Thus, the satellite TV channels deprive the mass people to be projected positively and effectively on the screen though they have to depend on the property of the people.

Face and Protocol Value vs. News Value

One of the common features of the news analyzed in the study was that the TV channels had given priority on the face and protocol value rather than the news value of an issue or event. Some identical faces were shown recurrently in different news items. The TV channels have created some 'experts' who were seen interviewing on different subjects irrespective of having expertise in a particular field. The faces projected in the news items commonly comprised political figures, ministers, bureaucrats, intellectuals, civil society members, corporate and business elites, bankers, sports persons and entrepreneurs. It revealed from the study that the influential class of the society having power, money and muscles were mainly projected in the television news violating value of an event or affair. The so called 'experts' opinion' were mainly male-dominated since the female experts were seen rarely in the news interviews. Thus, a large segment of the society was found deprived of presenting their voices reflected in television.

Leaning to Political Parties and Interests

The content analyzed revealed that the TV news were politically biased and supportive to the activities of the political party to which the ownership inclined to. For instance, ATN Bangla supported the visit of Prime Minister to Russia and the dealings with the country regarding purchasing of the weapons. The channel highlighted some positive aspects of the relationship and business prospects between the countries. The NTV supported and presented the activities of a few BNP leaders against the government proactively. The NTV projected the faces of a few leaders of BNP so immensely that it was easily understood the attachment of the channel with BNP.

Recurrent Projection and Sudden Closure

One of the common trends of the TV news projection was that some of the incidents were covered recurrently. On the other hand, the issue was suddenly dropped. Follow-up reporting on the same was hardly seen. It was due to tendency of event-based coverage of the news rather than investigation. The TV cameraperson and reporter are generally assigned to cover some identical events and affairs rather than independent searching of the facts associated with investigation and follow-up on the issues related to the public interests and affairs.

Syndication

The study revealed that all of the channels collected the news in the similar manner and from the uniform sources. There was no mentionable variation in the content and style of presentation. All the channels had almost similar news items to offer their audience.

There was less opportunity of scoop and exclusive news although they are the basic tools to draw attention of the audience. The television channels remained busy in covering the day's events rather than investigative and interpretative reports. The study also revealed that the TV channels hunted for the same person and same event to cover rather than finding out different issues for reporting. For this, even the headlines of the channels matched each other largely.

Surrender to Corporate Interests

Intrusion of corporate houses in different stages of the TV news presentation was really a matter of concern. Whatever business it was agricultural, national or international news, they were sold to the corporate houses. Before this trend, the advertisements of corporate houses were aired in different slots of time. But, with expansion of the satellite TV channels, expectation of the corporate houses has gone soaring up. At present, the corporate houses seemed dissatisfied with the publicity made by their television commercials only. They want more coverage and publicity of their products and services. The rising private television channels in the country do not hesitate taking advantages of the corporate interests to run their business smoothly. Consequently, the channels sell the news headlines to the corporate houses as per the demand. Thus, the corporate houses were found taking control over the news headlines in exchange of money and influence.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is visible from the study that the TV channels covered in the study showed their inclination towards particular political parties. They also emphasized

face and protocol value rather than the news value of an event or affair. Representation of power and politics was a common tendency of the TV channels in their news coverage. Some identical faces were found showing recurrently in the prime time news. The mass people drew little interests and attention of the TV channels while some particular classes having attachment to politics and power, money and influence got more attention and coverage. Some corporate houses were found trying to establish control over the content of the TV channels through sponsorship. Such tendency of representing some particular classes and identical faces is perceived as barriers to depicting the issues and affairs of the leftover overwhelming majority. With a view to contributing to national development, the TV contents should be selected and covered more professionally based on the news value. A comprehensive broadcast policy should be formulated to oversee the content coverage and presentation. Civil society, academia, government and the professionally dedicated journalists should come forward to change the mid-set of both the TV journalists and management so that they sincerely think of the issues of the mass people rather than the class people.

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